

Identification, Parent-Cathexis, and Self-Esteem¹

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Clinical observations provide the basis for suspecting that identification with parents, feelings and attitudes toward parents (parent-cathexis), and self-esteem all cohere as a syndrome. The present investigation is undertaken to verify the hypothesis of covariation among these variables, and to test relevant hypotheses concerned with identification and with the cathexis-response to persons—in this instance, parents and the self.

Method

Hypotheses

1. Identification with the parents' personalities varies with the nature of the feelings and attitudes of Ss toward their parents (parent-cathexis). Positive parent-cathexis is related to high identification scores, and negative parent-cathexis is related to low identification scores.

2. Identification with the parents' personalities varies with the extent to which the parents' personalities are congruent with the Ss' concepts of the ideal mother and the ideal father.

3. Cathexis for the parents varies with the extent to which the parents' traits conform with the Ss' concepts of ideal mother and ideal father.

4. Self-esteem varies with: (a) the degree of congruence between the Ss' traits, and their concepts of an ideal self; (b) the extent to

which the Ss' traits resemble those of their parents.

Subjects

Fifty-six male undergraduates and 56 female undergraduates from psychology classes at Emory University and at the Georgia State College of Business Administration served as Ss in the study. Mean age was 23.69 years, *SD* 3.39, for the males, and 20.89 years, *SD* 3.39, for the females.

Materials

Ten questionnaires were constructed from a series of forty personality traits which were to be responded to by Ss in different ways. The traits were:

1. Sense of humor.
2. Temper.
3. Ability to express self.
4. Ability to express affection.
5. Ability to express sympathy.
6. Self-understanding.
7. Usual mood.
8. General knowledge.
9. Popularity with others.
10. Self-confidence.
11. Ability to accept criticism.
12. Sensitivity to others' feelings.
13. Intelligence level.
14. Capacity for work.
15. Ability to meet new people.
16. Self-discipline.
17. Ability to make decisions.
18. Tolerance of others' shortcomings.
19. Ability to overcome self-consciousness.
20. Ability to relax and 'let hair down.'
21. Depth of feeling.
22. Sense of responsibility.
23. Understanding of intimates.
24. Receptiveness to new ideas.
25. Attitude toward sex.
26. Ease of getting to know.
27. Personality.
28. Ability to control emotion.

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29. Ability to put ideas across.
30. Degree of freedom from fear.
31. Degree of independence.
32. Ability to concentrate.
33. Ways of disciplining others.
34. Philosophy of life.
35. Religious beliefs.
36. Business sense.
37. Happiness.
38. Conformity to own moral standards.
39. Promptness in getting things done.
40. Ability to act the right way in every situation.

The traits are seen to be formulated in nontechnical language, so as to approximate the terms in which Ss think about and describe personality.

The questionnaires which were constructed from these traits, and the scores which were derived from them, are listed as follows:

a. Perceived similarity-to-parents questionnaire. Each S was requested to rate the extent to which he resembled his mother and father on each of the 40 traits, in accordance with the following instructions:

Below are listed a number of things characteristic of yourself, or related to you. Consider each item carefully, and decide which of your parents you resemble most in this characteristic. Then, encircle the appropriate number beside each trait, in accordance with the scale which follows. If you resemble both parents on a given trait, then encircle two appropriate numbers.

- + 3: Very close resemblance to your father in this respect
- + 2: Closely similar to your father in this respect
- + 1: Faintly resemble your father in this respect
- 0: Resemble neither father nor mother
- 1: Faintly resemble your mother in this respect
- 2: Closely similar to your mother in this respect
- 3: Very close resemblance to your mother in this respect

This scale appeared beside each trait on the "Similarity-to-Parents" questionnaire. Total *perceived similarity* scores were computed by summing the "plus" and "minus" numbers that had been encircled, and were designated I_f and I_m , for rated similarity to father and to mother, respectively.

b. The cathexis questionnaires. The forty traits were listed on separate forms, entitled "Feelings about Father," "Feelings about

Mother," and "Feelings about the Self." The Ss were instructed to indicate their feelings about these traits of the respective persons by encircling a number from the five-point scale which appeared beside each trait on the separate cathexis questionnaires. The numbers signified:

1. Have strong positive feelings; like very much.
2. Have moderate positive feelings.
3. Have no feelings one way or the other.
4. Have moderate negative feelings.
5. Have strong negative feelings; dislike very much.

Total scores were obtained by summing, and were designated *FC*, *MC*, and *SC* for father-cathexis, mother-cathexis, and self-cathexis (self-esteem), respectively.

c. Real- and Ideal-Person ratings. Six identical trait-rating forms were prepared from the trait list. Each trait was restated in the form of a continuum, with five scale points between the extremes. For example, the item *temper* was presented as a continuum with *even tempered* at one pole, and *very quick to lose temper* at the other. The S encircled a number from 1 to 5, indicating where the person being rated would fall along this continuum. The socially desirable version of each trait was randomly ordered throughout the list, so that for some traits, a score of 1 would indicate the desirable pole, while for others, a score of 3 or 5 would represent the desirable degree. This randomization was done in order to discourage response sets.³

The rating forms which the Ss completed were entitled *Real Father*, *Ideal Father*, *Real Mother*, *Ideal Mother*, *Real Self*, and *Ideal Self*. The S was instructed to "Put a circle around the number which best describes the person, with respect to each trait."

Two sets of discrepancy scores were calculated from these rating scales. One set pertained to the discrepancy between "real" and "ideal" ratings for mother, father, and the

³ One of the indicators of response sets is a marked preference on the part of Ss for some one response category, e.g., for high, middle, or low numbers on a numerical rating scale. Inspection of the data obtained in the present study showed considerable intraindividual variability, from questionnaire to questionnaire, in responding to items. While this is not proof that response sets were eliminated, it supports the contention that they were minimized.

self. These were obtained by subtracting the "real" ratings from the "ideal" ratings, ignoring sign, and then summing. Total "real-ideal" discrepancy scores were designated $Dis-F_i-F_r$, $Dis-M_i-M_r$, and $Dis-S_i-S_r$.

The other set of discrepancy scores computed from these forms provided a further index of similarity to parents, which is called the *derived similarity score*. These scores were obtained by comparing "Real Father" ratings with "Real Self" ratings, and "Real Mother" ratings with "Real Self" ratings, ignoring sign. Each pair of scores yielded a discrepancy with a possible range from 0 to 4. These discrepancies were summed, and designated $Dis-F_r-S_r$ and $Dis-M_r-S_r$ for differences between father's personality and the self, and mother's personality and the self, respectively.

In summary, each *S* completed a total of ten questionnaires. The names of these questionnaires, the order in which they were presented to the *Ss*, and the scores which were obtained from them are as follows:

- Similarity to parents (I_f and I_m —*Perceived similarity scores*)
- Feelings about father's personality (FC —*Father-cathexis scores*)
- Feelings about mother's personality (MC —*Mother-cathexis scores*)
- Feelings about the self (SC —*Self-cathexis scores*, the measure of self-esteem)
- Ideal Mother ratings
- Real Self ratings
- Real Father ratings
- Ideal Self ratings
- Real Mother ratings
- Ideal Father ratings

Discrepancies were computed between each pair of traits and summed through all traits, on forms (e) and (i) [$Dis-M_i-M_r$], (g) and (j) [$Dis-F_i-F_r$], and (f) and (h) [$Dis-S_i-S_r$]. These are the discrepancy-between-"real"-and-"ideal" ratings of the mother, father and self, and are termed *congruence measures* throughout the tables. Further discrepancies were determined and summed between (f) and (g) [$Dis-F_r-S_r$] and between (f) and (i) [$Dis-M_r-S_r$]. These latter comprise the two additional measures of similarity between the self

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Corrected Reliability Coefficients of the Scales

Scale	Men			Women		
	Mean	SD	r	Mean	SD	r
I_f	38.35	22.02	.91	38.31	20.36	.88
I_m	34.65	20.65	.90	37.82	19.07	.80
$Dis-F_r-S_r$	34.89	15.59	.84	37.62	14.70	.88
$Dis-M_r-S_r$	33.95	17.25	.88	35.09	12.67	.86
FC	86.02	26.18	.92	81.40	26.24	.94
MC	89.40	24.23	.92	87.95	23.39	.94
SC	87.80	22.23	.92	90.55	19.76	.90
$Dis-F_i-F_r$	36.57	21.40	.93	31.43	21.00	.93
$Dis-M_i-M_r$	35.76	18.29	.89	35.95	18.71	.92
$Dis-S_i-S_r$	37.18	19.69	.92	39.96	14.53	.86

and the parents, and are termed *derived similarity scores*.⁴

Testing Procedure

The questionnaires were stapled as a booklet and distributed to the *Ss* during a classroom period. Instructions for filling them out were presented orally. Date of birth, sex, and marital status were the only identifying information that was requested from the *Ss*, on the premise that relative anonymity would encourage frankness in response. The *Ss* took the booklets home with them, and returned the completed forms on a following day.

Results

General Results and Questionnaire Reliability

Means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for all variables are shown in Table 1. Each scale has satisfactory reliability.

None of the mean scores obtained by males and females on each scale showed any significant differences.

Identification with Parents and Parent-Cathexis

Hypothesis 1 may be restated: "If you *like* your parents, you tend to *be like* them."

⁴ The two measures of similarity-to-parents—perceived similarity scores and derived similarity scores—did not correlate very highly with each other. I_f correlated with $Dis-F_r-S_r$ only $-.35$ for males, and $-.20$ for females; I_m correlated with $Dis-M_r-S_r$ only $-.17$ among the males, and $-.43$ among the female *Ss*. In spite of their near-independence of each other, the perceived- and derived-similarity scores correlated in predicted ways with other variables.

Table 2
Correlations Between Similarity-to-Parents Scores
and Parent-Cathexis Scores

Index of Similarity	Men		Women	
	FC	MC	FC	MC
I_f	-.52**		-.45**	
$Dis-F_r-S_r$.43**		.28*	
I_m		-.38**		-.62**
$Dis-M_r-S_r$.20		.38**

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

Table 2 shows that both the perceived (I_f and I_m) and the derived ($Dis-F_r-S_r$ and $Dis-M_r-S_r$) indices of identification, or similarity to the parents, are significantly correlated with the parent-cathexis measures. In one instance only did an r fall short of significance, namely, that between $Dis-M_r-S_r$ and MC for males. Transformation of the r 's in this table (and all others) to z 's was performed, in order to permit cross-sex comparisons of the magnitude of r . None of the observed sex differences between r 's in Table 2 were significant.

Identification with Parents and Parental Congruence with Ideals

The second hypothesis predicted that Ss tend to "identify" only with those parental traits that coincide with their ideals for those traits. Thus, the larger the discrepancy between the actual (rated) traits of the parents, and the Ss' concepts of ideal parent, then the smaller are the perceived similarity scores (I_f and I_m), and the larger are the derived similarity scores. Table 3 shows that the obtained r 's among the relevant variables support the predictions in magnitude and in direction. It may be concluded that Ss tend to identify only with those parental traits which are exemplary for them; i.e., which coincide with their ideals.

Only one significant sex difference in r 's was obtained in Table 3; I_m correlated $-.26$ with $Dis-M_r-M_r$ for males, and $-.62$ for females. This difference yielded a t ratio for the corresponding z 's of 2.37 (p about .02). Evidently among males, perceived similarity with the mothers' traits is more independent of the

mothers' congruence with ideals than is the case for female Ss.

Parent-Cathexis and Parental Congruence with Ideals

It was predicted that the cathexis response to parents' traits varies with the magnitude of the discrepancy between the actual (rated) traits of the parents, and the Ss' ideals for parental traits. Table 4 shows that there is a substantial correlation between the cathexis measures and the extent of congruence between parents' traits and the Ss' ideals for those traits. It is further noted that MC is more highly related to $Dis-M_r-M_r$ among female Ss (.75) than among males (.29). The t ratio for the difference between the corresponding z 's was 3.46 (p less than .01). This difference suggests that among males, mother-cathexis is more independent of the mother's conformity with concepts of the ideal-mother than is the case among females.

Self-Esteem, Identification, and Congruence of Ideal Self with Real Self

Self-cathexis (SC) scores indicate the extent to which a person likes or dislikes his own traits. The SC scores may thus be regarded as indices of self-esteem. As with the parent-cathexis scores, SC correlated with the relevant discrepancy scores ($Dis-S_r-S_r$) with significances beyond the .01 level (.62 for males, and .53 for females).

The fact of covariance between SC scores and the identification estimates (I_f , I_m , $Dis-F_r-S_r$ and $Dis-M_r-S_r$) is shown in Table 5. The index of self-esteem (SC) is significantly

Table 3
Correlations Between Similarity-to-Parent Scores
and Parental Congruence with Ideals

Index of Similarity	Men		Women	
	$Dis-F_i-F_r$	$Dis-M_i-M_r$	$Dis-F_i-F_r$	$Dis-M_i-M_r$
I_f	-.57**		-.44**	
$Dis-F_r-S_r$.44**		.36**	
I_m		-.26*		-.62**
$Dis-M_r-S_r$.64**		.44**

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

correlated with all measures of similarity to the parents among male Ss, and with all indices among the females except *Dis-F_r-S_r*. The relative slight magnitude of the *r*'s suggests that self-esteem is only partly determined by parental identification, probably because identification itself seems to occur only when the parents' personalities are exemplary.

Discussion

General Results

The fact that none of the comparisons between mean scores of males and females that were reported in Table 1 showed significant differences warrants some comment. One might expect, for example, that males would obtain higher similarity-to-father scores than women, and that women would obtain higher similarity-to-mother scores than men. Further, it might be predicted that men would show greater similarity to their fathers than to their mothers, and vice versa for the female Ss. The lack of significant differences on these variables may possibly be attributed to the fact that the traits employed in the questionnaires are highly general in nature, and hence cannot be readily sex-typed.

Identification with Parents, Parent-Cathexis, and Parental Congruence with Ideals

Perceived- and derived-similarity scores were shown to be correlated significantly with the parent-cathexis scores. These findings lend support to Mowrer's theory of "developmental identification" which, loosely restated, asserts that positive feeling toward the parents fosters identification with their traits (6). It should be noted that the similarity scores used herein are at best only crude indices of identification.

Table 4

Correlations Between Parent-Cathexis Scores and Parental Congruence with Ideals

Congruence Measure	Men		Women	
	<i>FC</i>	<i>MC</i>	<i>FC</i>	<i>MC</i>
<i>Dis-F_i-F_r</i>	.83**		.78**	
<i>Dis-M_i-M_r</i>		.29*		.75**

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

Table 5

Correlations Between Self-Cathexis Scores and Measures of Similarity to the Parents

Index of Similarity	Men	Women
<i>I_f</i>	-.37**	-.43**
<i>Dis-F_r-S_r</i>	.50**	.19
<i>I_m</i>	-.38**	-.32*
<i>Dis-M_r-S_r</i>	.51**	.28*

* Significant at .05 level.

** Significant at .01 level.

It is always possible that the Ss' observations and judgments of similarity were *autistic*, i.e., strongly influenced by their feelings toward their parents. Indeed, the very fact of correlation between cathexis scores and similarity scores suggests that autism may have influenced their judgments. Finally, any real similarity between the Ss and their parents may have derived from sources other than identification, viz., patterned socialization and "direct tuition" practises (1, pp. 56-59) which produced similarities "by accident."

The findings with respect to identification and parental congruence with ideals suggest that identification is a *selective* process. It may be hypothesized that children do not identify with *all* of their parents' traits; rather, they select those traits which seem *worthy* of emulation, which will be instrumental in the attainment of assorted valued ends, viz., parental approval, success in achievements, etc. (cf. 3, 6).

Parent-Cathexis and Parental Congruence with Ideals

Cathexis has been redefined from its original psychoanalytic meaning by Parsons. He states that cathexis refers to "a state of the organism—a state of euphoria or dysphoria—in relationship to some object. . . . It is *object-oriented affect*. . . . It involves attaching affective significance to an object" (8, p. 10; his italics). In the present context, parent-cathexis refers to the feelings of liking-disliking for parents' traits. The idea that cathexis-responses might be related to the degree of congruence between actual or perceived characteristics of the object, and ideals pertaining

to that object, was suggested by an earlier work dealing with body-cathexis (4). As a hypothesis for further exploration, it is suggested that cathexis for other persons, the self, or any object is in part a function of the congruence of the object with Ss' ideals. This hypothesis has bearing on the theory of interpersonal attractiveness (7), sociometry, aesthetics, etc.

Self-Esteem, Identification, and Congruence between Ideal Self and Real Self

Self-esteem—positive cathexis for the self—appears to hinge upon congruence between the “real self” and the “self-ideal.” The obtained correlations between SC scores and similarity scores suggest that the parents' personalities may have served, not only as a model for the “real self” of the Ss, but also as the model for their self-ideals. Most psychoanalysts, in fact, trace the origin of the self-ideal (superego and ego-ideal) to identification with parents. The present findings may be viewed as partial support to the psychoanalytic theory of the relationship between identification and the superego (2, pp. 103–105).

Summary

Fifty-six male and 56 female college students were tested with a series of questionnaires designed to measure similarity with parents' personalities, parent-cathexis, and self-cathexis.

Scores indicative of the degree of similarity between the self and the parents were found to vary with parent-cathexis, and with the degree of congruence between the parents' per-

sonalities and the Ss' concepts of the ideal parent.

Parent-cathexis scores were found to vary with the degree of congruence between the parents' rated personalities, and Ss' concepts of the ideal parent.

Self-cathexis (a measure of *self-esteem*) was found to vary with (a) the congruence of the “real self” with the “self-ideal” and (b) with the degree to which Ss resembled their parents' personalities.

The findings were related to the theory of identification, and to a general theory of the cathexis-response to objects.

The overall results appear to confirm the clinical observation that identification with parents, feelings and attitudes to parents, and self-esteem all cohere as a syndrome (cf. 5, pp. 31–62).

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